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TAGS: PREL PGOV UY
SUBJECT: URUGUAY: NO SURPRISES IN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

REF: A. A) MVD 353
 1B. B) 2008 MVD 679
 1C. C) MVD 314
 1D. D) MVD 331

Classified By: CDA Robin Matthewman, for reason 1.4(b)

Summary

11. (C) There were few surprises in the June 28 elections to select presidential candidates from Uruguay's three major political parties, as the front runners translated their respective poll advantages into solid victories. The big winners were ex-President Luis Alberto Lacalle of the Blanco party and ex-Tupamaro guerrilla and current Senator Jose Mujica of the incumbent Frente Amplio (FA) coalition, and the battle between those two leading up to October's presidential vote is expected to be intense and closely fought. Colorado Party candidate Pedro Bordaberry overwhelmingly won his party's nomination, but only modestly increased the percentage of votes the Colorado Party attracted. The Blanco Party, in contrast, was buoyed substantially by its solid showing and projected image of unity. The candidates are expected to request meetings in Washington this summer to shore up their reputations on foreign policy issues. End Summary.

Large Turnout, Free and Fair Elections

12. (U) With a lower than expected turnout of around 40 percent of eligible voters, this Sunday finally allowed the Uruguayan electorate to settle the question of who will be the presidential candidates for the general elections in October. After what participants and media agreed was a typically free and fair election, Uruguay's electoral court announced that Jose Mujica (Ref A) will represent the incumbent Frente Amplio (FA) coalition, winning 54 percent of the FA vote to his closest competitor's 39 percent; ex-president Luis Alberto Lacalle will represent the Blanco (National) party, winning by a margin of 57-43 percent; and Pedro Bordaberry will be standing for the beleaguered Colorado party, winning an overwhelming 72 percent of the Colorado vote. Uruguay has a fourth established party, the Independent party, but that party generally receives only around one percent of the vote, and is not expected to be a factor unless the October election results trigger a presidential runoff (Ref B).

13. (U) Analysts explained the relatively low turnout -- pollsters predicted that around 55 percent of eligible voters would cast ballots -- as a function of Mujica and Bordaberry's insuperable leads within their parties, cold weather, and the fact that the election took place within Uruguay's winter school vacations. The Blanco party had a comparatively high turnout that pushed the Blanco vote to

exceed the total FA vote by a percentage point. Blanco voters may well have been drawn by the relatively close running of the two main candidates. The primary was not necessarily a valid snapshot of overall party support, as primary election voting is optional, and most polls show the FA with a clear edge in voting intention for October. However, the FA party leadership was clearly shaken by the number of party faithful who stayed home.

¶4. (U) Uruguay's open and active media affirmed that the vote had been free and fair. There was no election-related violence reported anywhere in the country. Uruguay has a history of peaceful and free elections, and has not had election observers in the past. This year, representatives from the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights were present strictly in an academic capacity, to compare Uruguay's with other election systems in the region and make systemic recommendations.

No Surprises

¶5. (U) Polls had identified Jose Pepe Mujica as the FA front runner even before he won the unofficial FA nomination at the FA's annual conference in December 2008. Bordaberry, the only rising star in the Colorado Party (polling at around 10 percent approval), has long been seen as that party's only viable candidate (Ref C). While the race for the Blanco Party's nomination was thought to be closer (Ref D), Lacalle had been building a lead in recent months over his rival Jorge Larriaga. The parties now will still need to strike internal deals, rearrange personnel and generally recalibrate their resources ahead of October's presidential fight.

A Clear Contrast, But An Expected Race to the Center

¶6. (C) With the Colorados working more toward rebuilding their party than winning the presidential election, the ensuing race looks set to be largely divided between the well-defined but contrasting personalities of the FA and Blanco candidates. Both Mujica and Lacalle are familiar entities on the Uruguayan political scene, having spent many years as stalwarts of, respectively, the left and right. Lacalle, who was president during a period of relative economic prosperity (1990-1995), strikes a sober note of experience and responsibility and draws his base of support mainly from older, upper, and middle class voters (Ref D). Mujica's more colorful image paints him as a man of the people, and his votes tend to come from the poorer sectors of society. Mujica's political profile continues to be informed by his past as a radical left & Tupamaro, guerilla fighter in the 60's and 70's.

¶7. (C) Both Mujica and Lacalle know that success lies in being able to attract the middle class. Crucially, this center-ground is home to the estimated 10 percent of undecided voters, a fact that both campaigns have already taken into account. Lacalle, who is sometimes seen as somewhat removed from the concerns of the public and who is overcoming the legacy of being associated with corruption during his first term, has begun to mix themes of social equality with his more customary rhetoric of the benefits of free trade and the importance of social and financial security. Meanwhile Mujica, who is often portrayed as distrustful of commerce, has been making attempts to reach out to business leaders and has recently spoken about the need to open up the national energy market.

Running Mates: Deals to be Done

¶8. (C) Possibly the most significant political signal immediately available to the candidates lies in the selection of their vice presidential running mates. Accordingly, both Mujica and Lacalle were expected to select running mates who could provide them with a reassuring political counterbalance. So far however, only Lacalle has confirmed his pick, nominating Larriaga, his rival in this year's

primary and the Blanco candidate for president in 2004. Larranaga is a relatively youthful, occasionally voluble figure who many Blancos believe could succeed Lacalle as president in 2014. The Blanco's quick announcement helped project confidence and unity and purpose. TV viewers generally went to bed on June 28 after watching the entire party leadership passionately singing at their victory party.

On the FA side, Mujica is currently engaged in negotiations with ex-finance minister and FA runner-up Danilo Astori, whom Mujica has publicly stated he needs for the FA to win. The FA has announced a party gathering for the weekend of July 5-6, during which its full ticket is expected to be decided. If Mujica cannot come to an agreement with Astori, then Marcos Carambula, the third-place FA candidate and governor of the vote-rich department of Canelones, is a likely second choice. Bordaberry had already declared that his Colorado running mate wouldn't be announced until the Party Assembly meets in the next few days, but it looks probable that ex-presidential candidate Jose Amorin will get the nod.

How Things Stand

¶9. (C) Outgoing President Tabare Vazquez remains the most popular politician in the country and the FA, while not at the moment as united as it could be, is a potent political force. Many analysts believe those factors give the FA a significant advantage leading into the October elections. It is uncertain whether that will be enough to help the FA win a simple majority of the vote, however, as it did in 2004. More likely, no party will get a majority, and there will be a run-off in November. In that event, there exists a strong possibility that the Blancos would pull out all the stops to attract Colorado Party voters. Polls show that a high percentage of Colorado supporters would vote for Lacalle before Mujica.

Comment: The Road Ahead

¶10. (C) The Blancos hit the ground running, bolstered by having edged out the Frente in total votes. Their early announcement of a ticket demonstrated cohesion in a party prone to fragmentation in the past. Meanwhile, the FA's protracted negotiations in cementing what most believe is an inevitable Mujica/Astori ticket cedes positive headlines to the Blancos.

Matthewman